The Four T's – Session Four

Tongue: The Languages of the Jews

Rabbi Irwin Keller – Fall 2021

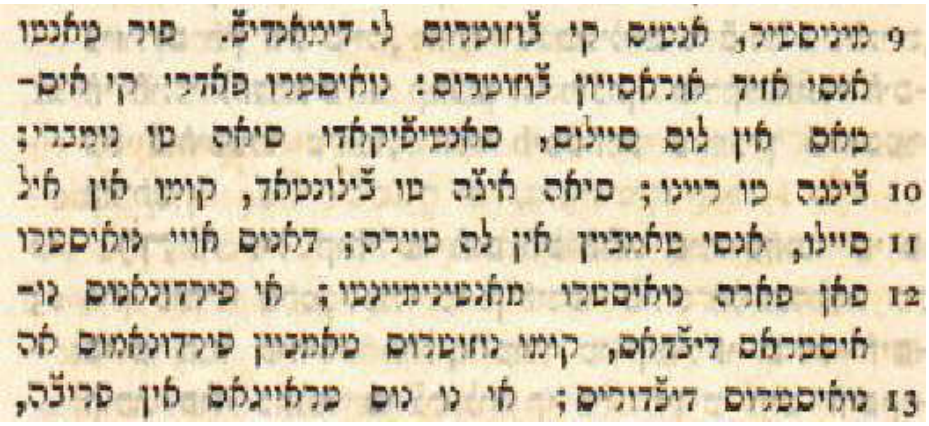


Table of Contents

The Letters of the Alphabet . . . p. 3

Hebrew & Aramaic in Antiquity . . . p. 4

Dialects . . . p. 5

Hebrew and Aramaic Writing . . . p. 6

Contributions of the Masoretes . . . p. 7

Meanwhile, Around the World . . . p. 8

The Esperanto Movement . . . p. 13

Hebrew Revival . . . p. 13

Some Hebrew Mechanics . . . p. 14

The Aleph-Bet . . . p. 15

Gematria . . . p. 16

Some Resources . . . p. 17

The Letters of the Alphabet

For two thousand years prior to the creation of the world, all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were hidden. During that time, God gazed upon the letters and delighted in them. Then, when God was about to create the world, all twenty-two letters engraved upon God's crown came down and stood before the throne, from *tav* to *aleph.* The letter *tav* approached first and said: "O Lord, create the world through me, for I am at the beginning of the word 'Torah.'"

God replied, "*Tav,* You are worthy and deserving, and in the days to come I shall command that you be put as a sign on the foreheads of the righteous, so that when the destroying angel comes to punish sinners, it will see the letter on their foreheads and spare them." But the letter *tav* was sad that it would not be used to create the world, and it left the presence of Adonai.

Then, one by one, each of the other letters came forward and pleaded with God to create the world through them. But God did not grant their wish. Soon all that remained were two letters, *aleph* and *bet. Bet* came forth and said, "O Lord, it would be appropriate to create the world through me, for your children will praise you through me every time they say 'Blessed (*barukh*) be Adonai for ever and ever.'"

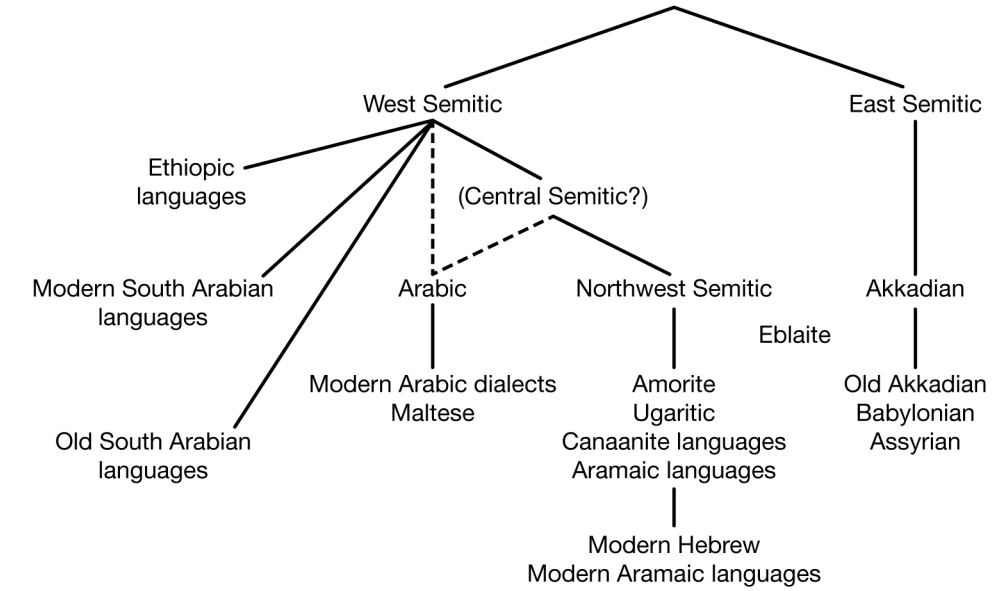
Then God said, "Blessed are you who comes in the name of Adonai." And God took the letter *bet* and created the world through it.

All this time the letter *aleph* had stood silent. Then God called it and said, "Why are you silent?" *Aleph* replied, "Master of the Universe, I am the least among the letters, for my value is but one. How can I presume to approach you?"

The words of the letter *aleph* were pleasing to God, and God said, "Because you are so modest, *aleph,* you shall become the foremost among the letters, for just as your value is one, so am I one and the Torah is one."

So it is that the *aleph* is the first letter of the alphabet, while *bet* is the first letter of *Bereshit,* the first word of the Torah, which means "in the beginning."

(Sources: *Alpha Beta de-Rabbi Akiva; and Yalkut Shim'oni, Zohar 1:2b.* Found in Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism.*)



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Biblical Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people in biblical times, is a Northwest Semitic language. By "Semitic," we mean that it shares ancestry with many other Near Eastern languages such as Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian, and Amharic. By "Northwest Semitic" we mean that it is indigenous to the Levant, i.e. ancient Canaan and its close surroundings, and most closely related to Aramaic, Ugaritic, Canaanite, Phoenecian, and Punic.

Torah recalls Abraham coming from Mesopotamia. And he is called a "Hebrew" (*ivri*) for having crossed the river in this journey. But Hebrew (*ivrit*) would not have been a language he brought with him. He would have acquired it upon settling in the land of Canaan.

Hebrew was the spoken language of the Jews in the time of the Judges and the time of the Kings. It was the official language of the Jewish monarchies: the united kingdom of King David, and subsequently in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. During this era of Israelite autonomy in the Land of Israel, governance took place in Hebrew, along with religious activity, song, poetry, etc.

In 721 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel. Thousands of Israelites were forcibly relocated to the heartland of the Empire and populations from the heartland were resettled in the former Kingdom of Israel. Presumably at this point Hebrew began to die out, at least in the north.

The southern Kingdom of Judah kept Neo-Assyria at bay by paying tribute, but was ultimately conquered in 586 BCE by the Babylonian Empire, which had meanwhile consumed the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The Exiles of Judah were marched off to Babylonia, where a rich Jewish life was about to be born.

In 538 BCE, the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, ended the Babylonian exile. Many Jews stayed in Babylonia, making it a center of Jewish life and learning. Those who returned were, it seems, no longer native Hebrew speakers, and neither were the fellow Judaeans they returned to. We know this from the Book of Nehemiah where we read about the first public reading of Torah:

> וְיֵשׁוּעַ וּבָנִי וְשֵׁרֵבְיָה יָמִין עַקּוּב שַׁבְּתַי הוֹדִיָּה מַעֲשֵׂיָה קְלִיטָא עֲזַרְיָה יוֹזָבָד חָנָן פְּלָאיָה
> וְהַלְוִיִּם מְבִינִים אֶת-הָעָם לַתּוֹרָה וְהָעָם עַל-עָמְדָם׃ וַיִּקְרְאוּ בַסֵּפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים מְפֹרָשׁ
> וְשׂוֹם שֶׂכֶל וַיָּבִינוּ בַּמִּקְרָא׃ {פ}
>
> Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites explained the Torah to the people, while the people stood in their places. They read from the scroll of the Torah of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

From this we gather that at the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile, only an educated elite understood Hebrew.

Aramaic continued to be the spoken language of the Jews in the Holy Land for nearly 1000 years. Hebrew became a language of prayer and scholarship. Other colonial languages entered the land – first Greek and then Latin – and these contributed substantial vocabulary to Aramaic and Hebrew.

As the language of the canonized Hebrew Bible and the language of Jewish prayer, Hebrew remained alive in Jewish communities as they spread out into the Diaspora after the Roman Conquest. For the Jews who spread out within the Near East and North Africa, Aramaic remained the common language until the Muslim Conquests of the 7th Century CE, when Arabic supplanted it. With a couple exceptions, Aramaic has survived in Judaism only in Talmud and in a handful of rituals and prayers meant to be offered in the vernacular so they could be popularly understood, such as the *Kaddish* and elements of the Passover Seder.

Dialects

Even in Biblical times, Hebrew had regional dialects. The pronunciation of the letter *shin* (ש) is famously used as a test in the Book of Judges to distinguish between native Judeans and Ephratite spies, who could not pronounce the sound /š/:

> וַיִּלְכֹּד גִּלְעָד אֶת-מַעְבְּרוֹת הַיַּרְדֵּן לְאֶפְרָיִם וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ פְּלִיטֵי אֶפְרַיִם אֶעֱבֹרָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ
> אַנְשֵׁי-גִלְעָד הַאֶפְרָתִי אַתָּה וַיֹּאמֶר | לֹא׃ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֱמָר-נָא שִׁבֹּלֶת וַיֹּאמֶר סִבֹּלֶת וְלֹא יָכִין
> לְדַבֵּר כֵּן וַיֹּאחֲזוּ אוֹתוֹ וַיִּשְׁחָטוּהוּ אֶל-מַעְבְּרוֹת הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיִּפֹּל בָּעֵת הַהִיא מֵאֶפְרַיִם אַרְבָּעִים
> וּשְׁנַיִם אָלֶף׃
>
> And Gil'ad seized the passages of the Yarden before Efrayim: and it was so, that when the fugitives of Efrayim would say, let me cross; that the men of Gil'ad would say to him, Art thou an Efratite? If he said, No; then they said to him, say now Shibbolet: and he said Sibbolet: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the fords of the Yarden; and there fell at that time of Efrayim forty two thousand. (Judges 12:5-6).

This story is the source of our English word "shibboleth," meaning a custom or principle distinguishing two kinds of people.

Hebrew & Aramaic Writing

The Hebrew writing system, or *aleph-bet*, derives from an Aramaic system, drawn from a Phoenician system. Unlike other regional writing systems, such as the cuneiform of Mesopotamia, in which symbols represent full syllables, and unlike Egyptian hieroglyphics, where glyphs can represent syllables, consonants, whole words, or semantic indicators, the Aramaic *aleph-bet* seems to be the first employing a phonetic system: signs were meant to represent one sound each, and only represented a sound.

The 22 letters are each visually modeled on something in the world, the name for which begins with the sound the letter comes to represent. For instance, *bet* is a symbol suggestive of a house – *beyt* – and makes the sound /b/. *Yod* looks like a hand – *yad* – and makes the sound /y/. *Resh* looks like a human head – *rosh* – and makes the sound /r/. So for novices, the phonetic system worked like a rebus. Readers would recognize the picture and speak the first sound only of what they saw.

The significance of this system is that one only needed to learn 22 characters. This enabled a writer or reader to capture the entire language with only a small amount of learning necessary. Any word could be conveyed with the 22 letters; one did not need to learn a special character for "pomegranate" or "gazelle." One could, for the first time, simply *spell* them.

Below is a chart of the Hebrew/Aramaic letters in an earlier form, before the square letters we know evolved out of them:

The Contribution of the Masoretes

The Hebrew writing system did not convey every sound. Consonants are all written. Long /ō/ and long /ū/ are indicated with a *vav;* long /ī/ and y-dipthongs (ay, ey) are indicated with a *yod.* But short vowels are omitted entirely. Readers and writers already spoke the language; they dd nt need evrythng splld out fr thm.

As Torah came to be read across great geographical distances by Jewish communities who were not native Hebrew speakers, discrepancies happened. Words were coming to be pronounced (and thus interpreted) differently in different communities.

In an effort to standardize Torah pronunciation and chanting melodies, scholars known as Masoretes developed systems for indicating vowel quality and musical cantillation. This happened from about the 5th to 10th Centuries CE. There were competing systems; ultimately the one developed by the Ben Asher family prevailed. It is a complex system which preserves much important information about the grammatical and phonological structures of Biblical Hebrew.

So for example, in the Torah scroll, the *Shema* looks like this:

שׁמע ישׂראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד

But in the Masoretic text, it looks like this:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה | אֶחָד׃

You can see that most written consonants are supplied a vowel sign in the form of dots or lines above or below. Each word is also supplied a cantillation or "trope" mark, signaling the melody to which the word should be chanted. Although not exhibited here in the text of *Shema,* there are dots to distinguish between long /ū/ and long /ō/, and dots to distinguish whether certain consonants are to be pronounced as stops (hard sounds such as b, p, k, t) or as spirants (soft sounds v, f, kh, th).

There is also a vertical line in the *Shema* text above of uncertain meaning separating the last two words (some conjecture this line to mean that there is an error and the previous word does not properly belong in the Torah text; this would in fact make *shema* read more naturally).

These Masoretic additions create a more-or-less completely phonetic system of reading Hebrew. However, outside of Torah study, voweled texts in Hebrew are uncommon. In Modern Hebrew voweled texts are used to teach children to read, but are rarely included in newspapers, books, or appliance instructions, except to the extent that a vowel sign is needed to distinguish between two possible readings of a word.

Meanwhile, Around the World

Meanwhile, in the first millenium of the Common Era, Jews spread around the Middle Eastern, African, and European worlds. In each place that Jews lived, prayer and ritual continued in Hebrew, but the daily vernacular was that of the local population, at least initially. And in each case, the Jewish community made the local language their own, peppering it with Jewish terms, and developing language for concepts peculiar to Jewish life.

Greece. Jews first settled in Greece during the days of the Greek Empire. That oldest Greek Jewish community, the Romaniyote community, spoke a language sometimes called **Judeo-Greek**, sometimes called **Yevanic**. Very few speakers remain.

Italy. During the Roman Empire Jews began moving into Italy. Jewish dialects of **Judeo-Italian** arose, including Jewish Venetian and Jewish Roman. Early on, these languages Italianized Hebrew words, conjugating them as if they were Italian (Yiddish does this as well). Examples include the word *achlare,* "to eat," from Hebrew *akhal*; *lechtire,* "to go," from Hebrew *lekhet; dabberare* "to speak," from Hebrew *daber.* And self-evident is the word for "lucky": *ammazzallato.*

A glossary translating Hebrew food words into Judeo-Italian.

Arab World. Jews living in the Arab world spoke **Judeo-Arabic** – a Jewishly specific Arabic typically written in Hebrew letters. Judeo-Arabic flourished in the Middle Ages and many of the greatest works of Jewish philosophy and poetry were written in it, including Bahya ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart,* Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed,* and Yehudah Halevi's *Kuzari.*

Across the Arab world, Judeo-Arabic incorporated Hebrew and Aramaic words specific to Jewish life, practice, and thought. Pronunciation often differed from that of the surrounding Muslim populations' Arabic. This is especially noteworthy in Yemen where, for instance, the Jews would pronounce the long vowel /ū/ where their Muslim neighbors would pronounce /ī/.

Judeo-Arabic varies across regions and has varied across time. Below is a page of a 20th Century North African *siddur,* in which the Hebrew of the Shema is written on the write page; a Judeo-Arabic translation, written in Hebrew letters, is on the facing page:

Spain. In early medieval Spain, Arabic was the language of the Muslim population, Judeo-Arabic that of the Jewish population. As more of the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by Catholic rulers, Spanish came to be the daily language of the Jews – although not always without resistance. Yehudah HaLevi lived in a portion of Spain that had been reconquered by the Spanish rulers, but purportedly wrote his polemical treatise, *The Kuzari,* in Judeo-Arabic, because it was the language of the educated Jewish classes.

Eventually the Jews of Spain were speakers of Old Spanish, with influences from other Iberian languages, and an influx of Jewish vocabulary. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, the bulk of the Exiles moved east to the Balkans – Greece and Turkey – where their Jewish Spanish was retained and continued to grow and flourish.

This Jewish language, known as Ladino or Judezmo, was primarily Old Spanish, but incorporated words from Portuguese (including *Abastádo,* meaning "Almighty," referring to God). It drew into itself words from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, and continued to use Hebrew vocabulary as well, for instance *atakanear* "to arrange," *beraxa* "blessing," *maasé* "story," *sedaka* "charity."

A few words of poetry from Bouena Sarfatty, a 20th Century Ladino poet originally from Salonica:

> La nona moz vino a vijitar.
> Komo kada semana, roskas mos ezo,
> I metio raki a la masa.
> Las reoucho tanto bouenas ke mos tresalimos kouando laz goustimos.
> Bevamos a la saloud de Alegra Almoznino.

"Grandmother came to visit us. / Like every week, she made us "roska" cookies, / and measured out *araq* into the dough. / They struck as so delicious that we were thrilled when we ate them. / Let us drink to the health of Alegra Almoznino."

Central and Eastern Europe. In late part of the first millinium CE, Jews began moving into Central Europe over the Alps from Italy or through Spain. A great center of Jewish life took shape along the Rhine River, centered around the cities of Speyer, Worms and Mainz. This area came to be known among the Jews as Ashkenaz.

The Jews began speaking a Rhinish dialect of German, again inflected for Jewish particulars, incorporated substantial Hebrew vocabulary, and written in Hebrew letters. As Jews migrated eastward as a result of local expulsions or in response to word of more welcoming territories in the Russian or Lithuanian empires, they took this language with them, calling it **Yiddish** ("Jewish"), and maintained it as a source of identity, differentiating them from their Slavic-speaking neighbors and providing a warm *mame-loshn* (mother tongue) for home and a secret language in public.

"Western Yiddish" looks in many ways very similar to German. But the Yiddish of the Slavic-speaking countries absorbed words of Russian and Lithuanian, which form a substantial portion of the Yiddish vocabulary.

During the Enlightenment, Yiddish experienced a tremendous literary awakening. While earlier printed works had primarily been translations of religious texts, the Enlightenment suddenly made a place and an appetite for secular works, resulting in thousands of books of Yiddish fiction and poetry beginning in the mid-late 19th Century, as well as many competing literary journals and magazines. Before the Shoah, Yiddish had many millions of speakers, primarily in Europe and the US. It was a language not only of literature but of politics and organizing. It was also, both through women's prayerbooks and through the practices of the Bratzlaver Chasidim, a language of personal prayer. In 1978 Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his Yiddish stories and novels.

In the 21st Century, Yiddish continues to be spoken as a first language by Chasidic and Ḥaredi Jews in America and Israel primarily. For others it is a “post-vernacular” language that is studied and learned as a means of remembrance and of cultivating a Diasporic Jewish identity. Yiddish is well documented and preserved through organizations such as YIVO and the Jewish Book Center. A project funded by Steven Spielberg has digitized tens of thousands of Yiddish books and made them available through the Jewish Book Center website.

A quick snippet:

Meydlekh in Krotona-Park — מיידלעך אין קראָטאָנאַ-פּאַרק

Anna Margolin (1887-1952)

אין האַרבסטיקן פאַרנאַכט
האָבן מיידלעך זיך פאַרוועבט
ווי אין אַ וועלקן בילד.
זייערע אויגן זײַנען קיל, דער שמייכל ווילד און דין.
זייערע קלײדער זײַנען לאַוונדער, אלטדֿרויז און עפּלדֿגרין.
אין זייערע אָדערן פּליסט טוי.
זיי האָבן ווערטער העלע און לערע.
זיי האָט אין טרוים גענליבט באַטיטשעלי.

In harbstikn farnakht
hobn meydlekh zikh farvebt
vi in a velkn bild.
Zeyere oygn zaynen kil, der shmeykhl vild un din.
Zeyere kleyder zaynen lavender, alt-royz un epl-grin.
In zeyere odern flist toy.
Zey hobn verter hele un lere.
Zey hot in troym gelibt Botitsheli.

Girls have woven themselves into autumn evenings
as in a faded picture.
Their eyes are cool, their smiles wild and thin,
their dresses lavender, old rose, apple green.
Dew flows through their veins.
Their talk is bright and empty.
Botticelli loved them in his dreams.

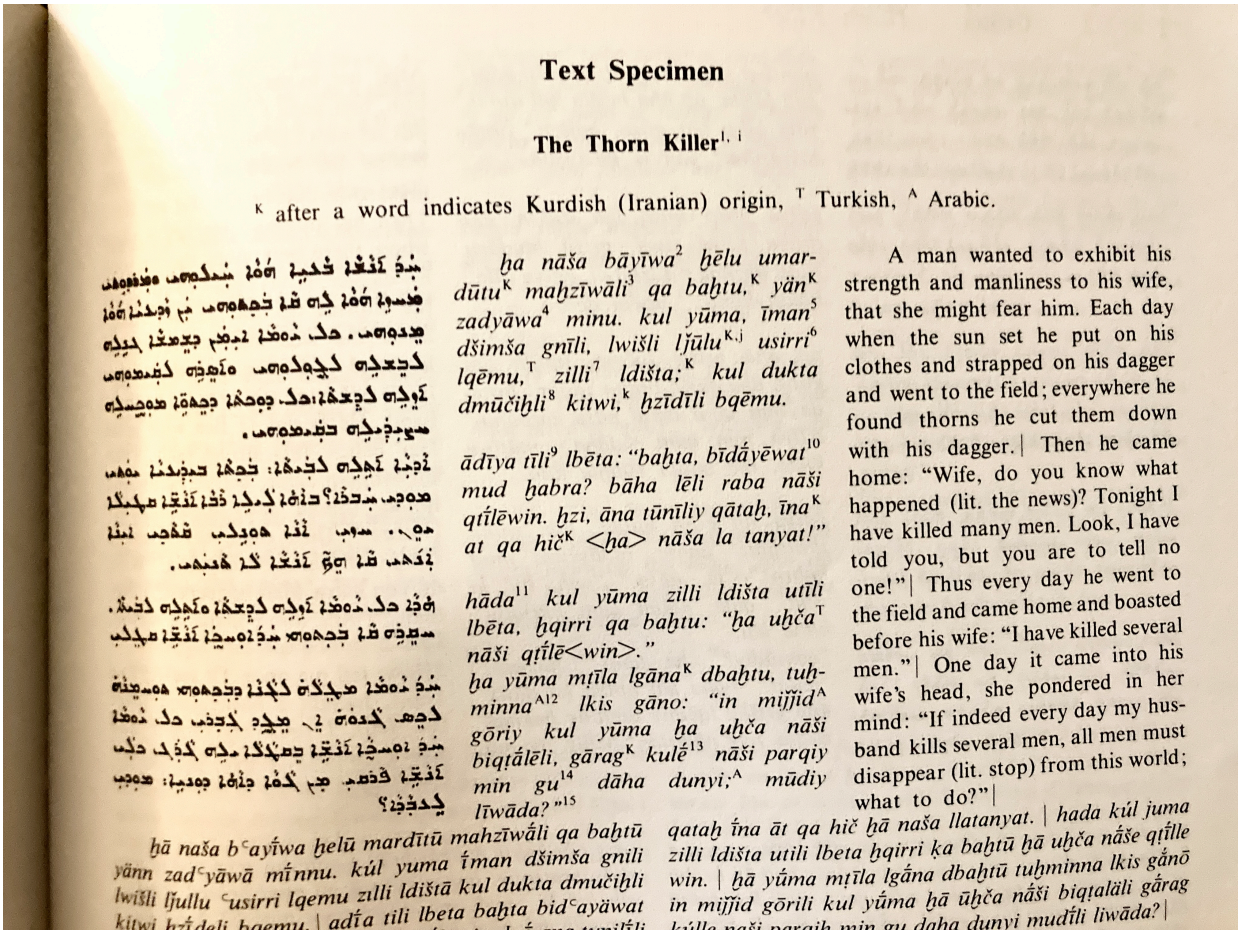
(Translation: Marcia Falk)

One Jewish language forms an especially interesting case. When the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 721 BCE by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it was the end of that kingdom. Its citizens were either deported to the heartland of the Empire, or assimilated with the Neo-Assyrians who then colonized those lands of Israel. These are who are known folklorically as the Lost Tribes of Israel.

But some of the deportees maintained their identity as Israelites. Those who lived in isolated pockets in Persia and Kurdistan maintained the Aramaic of the Neo-Assyrian Empire after the Muslim Conquests had brough Arabic to those places. The Jews of these communities continued to speak Aramaic in an unbroken lineage well into the 20th Century, when they were forcibly relocated to the State of Israel and their language, known among scholars as **Neo-Aramaic**, but known internally as Lishan Didan ("our language") began to die out.

Scholar Yona Sabar has written a dictionary of Neo-Aramaic. And the story of the Jews of this region and the loss of their culture in Israel has been written about by his son Ariel Sabar, in his 2008 memoir, *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq*.

There are existing recordings of native speakers, but there isn't a history of print literature. Below is an excerpt of a story collected in an oral history:



Text Specimen

The Thorn Killer[1, i]

[K] after a word indicates Kurdish (Iranian) origin, [T] Turkish, [A] Arabic.

ḫa nāša bāyīwa[2] *ḫēlu umar-dūtu*[K] *maḫzīwāli*[3] *qa baḫtu,*[K] *yän*[K] *zadyāwa*[4] *minu. kul yūma, īman*[5] *dšimša gnīli, lwišli lǰūlu*[K,j] *usirri*[6] *lqēmu,*[T] *zilli*[7] *ldišta;*[K] *kul dukta dmūčiḫli*[8] *kitwi,*[K] *ḫzīdīli bqēmu.*

A man wanted to exhibit his strength and manliness to his wife, that she might fear him. Each day when the sun set he put on his clothes and strapped on his dagger and went to the field; everywhere he found thorns he cut them down with his dagger.| Then he came home: "Wife, do you know what happened (lit. the news)? Tonight I have killed many men. Look, I have told you, but you are to tell no one!"| Thus every day he went to the field and came home and boasted before his wife: "I have killed several men."| One day it came into his wife's head, she pondered in her mind: "If indeed every day my husband kills several men, all men must disappear (lit. stop) from this world; what to do?"|

ādīya tīli[9] *lbēta: "baḫta, bīdáyēwat*[10] *mud ḫabra? bāha lēli raba nāši qtílēwin. ḫzi, āna tūnīliy qātaḫ, īna*[K] *at qa hič*[K] *<ḫa> nāša la tanyat!"*

hāda[11] *kul yūma zilli ldišta utīli lbēta, ḫqirri qa baḫtu: "ḫa uḫča*[T] *nāši qtílē<win>."*

ḫa yūma mṭīla lgāna[K] *dbaḫtu, tuḫminna*[A12] *lkis gāno: "in mǰǰid*[A] *gōriy kul yūma ḫa uḫča nāši biqtálēli, gārag*[K] *kulé*[13] *nāši parqiy min gu*[14] *dāha dunyi;*[A] *mūdiy līwāda?"*[15]

ḫā naša bᶜayíwa ḫelū mardītū mahzīwāli qa baḫtū yänn zadᶜyāwā mínnu. kúl yuma ímān dšimša gnili lwišli ljullu ᶜusirri lqemu zılli ldištā kul dukta dmučiḫli kitwi ḫzídeli bqemu. | *adía tili lbeta baḫta bidᶜayāwat qataḫ ína āt qa hič ḫā naša llatanyat.* | *hada kúl juma zilli ldišta utili lbeta ḫqirri ḳa baḫtū ḫā uḫča nášе qtílle win.* | *ḫā yúma mṭīla lgána dbaḫtū tuḫminna lkis gánō in mijjid gōrili kul yúma ḫā ūḫča náši biqtaläli gárag*

The Esperanto Movement

As modernity kicked in and the Enlightenment took hold among European Jewry, there were several linguistic impacts.

One worth mentioning was the development of an invented language by a Jewish oculist in Bialystok named Ludwig Zamenhof called **Esperanto.** Esperanto was a language with easy forms, no exceptions, based on roots from several European language groups. Zamenhof's goal was to give the world a shared second language so that no nation was preferenced in international dialogue, and so that the people of different nations could get to know each other directly.

The Esperanto Movement grew and had hundreds of thousands of speakers. It was especially popular among Jews, who were primed for utopian visions growing out of millennia of messianic visioning. The joke was popularly told about the annual international Esperanto conventions, where the participants would present lectures in Esperanto, and then have coffee and cigarettes in Yiddish.

There is still an active Esperanto Movement worldwide, although it is a shadow of what it was before the Holocaust, which decimated its Jewish and intellectual membership.

Hebrew Revival

Another outcome of the Enlightenment was the development of the Zionist movement in 19th Century Europe. As part of its vision, it foresaw a return of the Jewish people to a politically autonomous land of Israel, with Hebrew as official and spoken vernacular language.

A revival began to occur as Yiddish poets such as Chaim Nachman Bialik began to write in Hebrew. Lexicographers such as Eliezer Ben Yehudah set about foraging through millennia of rabbinic Hebrew literature to develop vocabulary for modern-day, everyday experience. Ultimately a Hebrew Academy was constituted to continue the process of developing new coinages through today.

While based on biblical Hebrew, **Modern Hebrew** is simpler grammatically, but very generative lexically. New words are created daily, on the spot.

Hebrew is one of the official languages of the State of Israel. It is the language of daily life, education, entertainment, poetry, popular music, as well as the diasporic language of Israeli ex-patriots around the world. It was learned by many Diaspora Jews since the establishment of the State as a means of shoring up Jewish identity.

Shmuel Agnon was the first Hebrew writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966.

Some Hebrew Mechanics

Characteristic of Hebrew is the use of consonantal roots – typically three consonants – which offer a core meaning or semantic field. Then the grammatical information is provided by prefixes, suffixes, and vowel choice. Those elements identify whether the word is noun or verb, past or future, singular or plural. They provide information on who is acting and who is being acted upon, and whether the action is internal, reciprocal, or causative.

An example: the root *s-f-r.* The three consonants have a semantic sense of counting or telling ("recounting"). So here are some examples of how this root gets put into use:

סָפַר	*safar*	"he counted"
סָפַרְתִּי	*safarti*	"I counted"
סִפֵּר	*siper*	"he told"
סִפַּרְתִּי	*siparti*	"I told"
סֻפַּר	*supar*	"it was told"
מִסְפַּר	*mispar*	"number"
סוֹפֵר	*sofer*	"he tells," also "author"
סֵפֶר	*sefer*	"book"
הַסֵּפֶר	*hasefer*	"the book"
סְפָרִים	*s'farim*	"books"
סְפִירָה	*s'firah*	"counting" or Sefirah in mysticism

ד	ג	ב	פ	א
dalet /d/	gimmel /g/	vet /v/	bet /b/	aleph /’/
ט	ח	ז	ו	ה
tet /t/ or /ṭ/	ḫet /ḫ/ or /ḥ/	zayin /z/	vav /v/ or /w/	heh /h/
ל	ך	כ	כּ	י
lamed /l/	final khaf	khaf /ḫ/	kaf /k/	bet /y/ or /ī/
ס	ן	נ	ם	מ
samekh /s/	final nun	nun /n/	final mem	mem /m/
צ	ף	פ	פּ	ע
tzade /tz/	final feh	feh /f/	peh /p/	ayin /ʔ/
שׂ	שׁ	ר	ק	ץ
sin /s/	shin /š/	resh /r/	qof /q/ or /k/	final tzade
		וּ	וֹ	ת
		shuruk /ū/	cholam /ō/	tav /t/

Gematria

Since antiquity, Hebrew letters have been used to record numbers. Each letter of the alephbet was assigned a numerical value. So an *aleph* represents the number 1, *bet* the number 2.

This is not a decimal system. So for eleven, you have *yod-aleph,* ten + one.

In mystical interpretation of Torah text, words are given a numerical value by adding together the value of all their letters. Words that come to the same sum are considered linked and possibly equivalent. They hyperlink to each other. So, for instance *malakh* (angel) comes to 91. So does *HaElohim* – ([the] God). This suggests or confirms to mystics that the appearance of an angel is actually the appearance not of an independent being but of the one and only God.

1	א
2	ב
3	ג
4	ד
5	ה
6	ו
7	ז
8	ח
9	ט
10	י
20	כ
30	ל
40	מ
50	נ
60	ס
70	ע
80	פ
90	צ
100	ק
200	ר
300	ס
400	ת

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Oxford School of Rare Jewish Languages:
https://www.ochjs.ac.uk/language-classes/oxford-school-of-rare-jewish-languages/

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